



Setsuko Asano



Setsuko Asano at the Japanese American Museum of San Jose

“My family, my parents became pro-America immediately. Their whole psyche was completely turned around.”

Setsuko (Izumi) Asano was born on the auspicious day of March 3rd, 1932 or hinamatsuri, the annual celebration of Girls Day in Japan. Perhaps it was fitting that Setsuko's birth would fall on such a day, as she was last born in a line up of five daughters in her family, with no sons. Sets was born to two Issei parents; her mother was a skilled midwife and nurse, and her father was a journalist, writing and editing for a Japanese language newspaper distributed primarily to the farming community. Her mother was an exceptionally strong woman, living through truly difficult events that would not only affect her as a Japanese national but as a person of Japanese ancestry living in the United States. At 18-years-old, she was conscripted to help wounded or ailing Japanese soldiers during the invasion of Manchuria, and also lived through the WWII incarceration. After the outbreak of the war, the Izumi family was uprooted from their home in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles to the forested area of Rohwer, Arkansas. When an unexpected job was offered to her father by a kindly shrimp entrepreneur in Louisiana, the Izumi family ended up staying and living in the South, a rarity for most Japanese Americans and an experience Setsuko speaks fondly of to this day. "The South, they're very hospitable, they think of you. They're friendly. I loved it. I could live there all the time. As it was, I lived there fifteen years."

In her own right, Setsuko would become a successful professional in the sciences as a microbiologist. After going to school at Louisiana State University, Setsuko would go on to work for the state's health department, eventually moving to Los Angeles with her mother where she worked at St. Francis Medical Center in Lynwood.

Setsuko's daughter, Sandy Mar, was present at the interview to help fill in gaps and give context to her mother's oral history. All responses below are given by Setsuko, unless noted with Sandy's name.

My name is Setsuko Evelyn Asano, born in Los Angeles, California, March 3rd, 1932.

Can you describe a typical day growing up in Los Angeles? What were your parents doing and what was your family like?

My father was a journalist working for the local Japanese vernacular newspaper. And my mother was a housewife. We lived in Boyle Heights, which is typical L.A. community.

And were they both Issei?

Yes from Yamaguchi-ken.

Did they meet before they moved to the United States?

Yes, yes. It was one of those fixed marriages.

Do you feel they were they happily married?

Oh yes.

So your father, what kind of journalism did he do?

He was the editor of the Japanese vernacular newspaper, the *Sangyo Nippo*.

I see. So a very educated man.

I guess so if you can manage a newspaper, right? Mostly a paper for the farmers, the local farmers in that area.

So then you grew up in L.A. How many other siblings did you have?

I had four but they're all deceased. And I was the last one, a menopausal child, nine years late. The next sister's nine years older than I am.

And so you had two sisters or how did it break down?

They're all girls.

Would you say that you grew up fairly comfortable in Boyle Heights or, you know, you lived a pretty comfortable life before the war?

I would say it's a typical Japanese life, I think. You're going to school constantly. Grammar school. And then as soon as I come home, we'd go to Japanese school five days a week. Everyday.

So you are fluent then?

Enough to get by I would say.

Did you mostly speak to your parents in Japanese?

Yes. That's how we communicated because they couldn't speak English.

And so right before Pearl Harbor in 1941 you were how old?

I was 10-years-old. I don't remember much.

Do you remember the day at all?

You know, all I remember was everyone was hovered around the radio. And then we had to put up sheets for, I guess at night, you know, couldn't have any lights on. That really stuck in my mind.

In case there were air raids?

I thought, oh, that's all I remember is putting up the sheets.

Did you feel afraid? Did you kind of understand that?

I had no idea. I was just there.

And were your four sisters still living there?

No, I was the last one. Nine years later. The last one came so they all had their own families. They were all gone out of the house.

So just you and your parents right at the house. And do you recall anything that your parents might have said or how they reacted after?

I have no recollection.

So when do you start remembering the kind of memories that involve going to the assembly center or camp? When do the memories kick in for you?

I still remember vividly the horse stables, that really struck me. And then to see the grandstand at Santa Anita.

What do you remember about having to live there?

Well, I saw some of the older adults making camouflage nets right at the grandstand. I remember that. And then more stables, of course. [My family was in] the regular stable. I still remember, Avenue 68. And a blue mess hall. And it's interesting, we went on a tour after this, when we returned and we passed that same mess hall. And where we used to go where the jockeys go now. And they still use that mess hall. I remember that vividly. And I still remember apple butter to this day, I think because that's all we had. Apple butter on toast is what they fed us.

And how about your sisters and their families? Were you together?

They lived in Detroit, the oldest one.

Did your other two live in Los Angeles still?

One lived in Buffalo, New York. Her husband was a translator. So International Institute was what it was called in Buffalo, Japanese translator. And then the next sister, the third one, I guess she was next. [Masako], she was with me. We're nine years apart so I can't recall.

Going back to a little bit, what happened to your home and all of your

possessions?

I have no idea. I can't remember anything. I was quite young. I don't know.

But you were probably renting a house or something?

Oh yes, I'm sure.

And so then, going to Rohwer. Do you remember the train ride out there?

I remember that, it's very vivid. It took 10 days just to go to Arkansas. We'd always have to stay on the side tracks and wait for the regular train to go. And it was interesting. My older sister wanted — she's crazy, but she wanted to get postcards and get off in Texas. And they were there with the rifles and they wouldn't allow her to leave. She was weird. She just had to get a postcard. You know? She thought she was on a tour! She's going across the country.

And what else about the train ride? Was it uncomfortable?

Well, we sat up all the time. We couldn't, you know [lie down]. We'd have to be on the side tracks and wait for the regular trains to go by. We were just low priority, so we'd be waiting. Constantly waiting. It was a long trip, ten days. I thought they treated us like cattle. Really. That's what it boils down to.

And you had no idea where you were going?

Well, no, I was too young. I just remember, "Oh, train ride!"

So you kind of felt protected, you didn't feel any fear at this point?

No, at this point it's just a fun ride. You know, joy ride.

And so when you got to Rohwer, what do you remember about it?

The humidity, and the mosquitoes. There were a lot of forests, really in the forest. I mean, you could see trees all over.



Original WRA caption: Rohwer Relocation Center, McGehee, Arkansas. Barrack scene at Rohwer Relocation Center. Photo taken in December of 1943.

What did you end up doing for fun? Did you make friends there?

We were all in blocks, so we were with our age group. I was active in the Girl Scouts. That's what they had for us at my age group.

What were some of the things you did as a Girl Scout?

I can't recall [laughs]. It was just to get together with our peers. The girls were very nice. The leader ended up in Cincinnati. She was very nice, was Japanese. I remember her very well. I knew that we lived in the last block in that area near the forest. A wooded area.

That's why Arkansas was so different than the other camps because it was wooded, everything else was desert.

And our Block 7 happened to be the corner. The last block in the area because one through seven and then backtracked to twelve.



And what was the food like? Do you remember the food?

Just the fact that we had to eat in the mess hall. And what bothered me was we lost that whole family unit because the children would sit with their friends. You know, that was really lost. I think that was sad because

we were a very close knit family and we all of a sudden lost that.

You weren't sitting with your parents anymore?

Oh, no. I don't know why, but I guess I miss that. You know, it's a tradition that we had that was gone.

Did your parents work in camp?

My father was a block manager. So he had a lot of responsibility.

Was he bilingual?

Well, to a certain extent. He could just sort of get by in broken English.

So there are four of you then in Rohwer: Masako, yourself, your mom and dad?

Oh, yes. Yes.

Were you close with your sister?

Yes, I was the spoiled one because I was the last menopausal child coming in. Nine years later, They spoiled me, and I don't remember too much.

Your parents had all daughters.

Sandy: Isn't that strange?

Yes. My father was so upset when I came along, he just went out and got drunk that day. Because he was really looking forward to a boy. You know, they [the doctor] determines the sex. And he goes, "It's his fault" [to Sets' dad].

Sandy: Out of five, and they never had a boy.

Sets: And you know, in the Japanese culture, women don't count.

Back then, it was very different.

Sandy: Chinese culture is that way too.

Do you remember anything about school in camp?

Setsuko: Well, I remember our desks were made of logs. I still have a picture.

Sandy: And do you remember that teddy bear you had? That was the one you took to camp, huh?

Setsuko: My Panda bear? That's the same one I have [*laughs*].

Sandy: And it looks really old obviously. I was going to take it to the dry cleaner to see what they could do with it. I'm kind of scared it will fall apart, but it is in pretty good shape.

Setsuko: It still has eyes.

Do you know who gave it to you?

You know, my father bought it one night. We used to go out a lot on weekends and go to the movies. And then we'd always stop at a drugstore because my father had to have his cigar. And I saw it there and he bought it for me. I still remember that. Oh, it was near the Orpheum Theater back in L.A., downtown.

That's really that's amazing. You should keep that though as a family heirloom.

Sandy: Right. Yeah. I really can't believe that it's traveled all the way, you know.



Setsuko and her father in Rohwer

So you started junior high in camp?

Something like that. My first impression was [it was the] first time all the Japanese were together, no whites that were there, they were all Japanese. I think I was more impressed with the idea of the area. Find all these Japanese not in Little Tokyo, but in the wooded area. And we sat in these log desks in alphabetical order.

And you were there for all three years in camp?

Yeah, until the war was over.

Even though you were too young at the time, knowing what you know now about the loyalty questionnaire, what are your thoughts about it?

Well, I feel that everything happened because of the color of my skin, the way we look. And I think that impressed me more so when I went to the South, because that's where there's really discrimination. And I grew up there.

When you say South —

In New Orleans, I lived in New Orleans for 15 years.

Oh, this is after camp.

Yes.

Why New Orleans?

My father was somehow in the shrimp business. He couldn't speak English, couldn't write English, so he wrote in characters. And he somehow was accepted by this Chinese man who was so kind to us. And he invited him to come there from Rowher to New Orleans. So we were in the shrimp business. I lived in New Orleans for 15 years.

That's fascinating. I have never heard of somebody relocating to the South after.

That was unusual. But I love the South. They're a different breed.

Segregation and all that was still happening, right?

Oh yes. We were considered white. Very interesting. Because the public restroom: White and colored.

And what were you able to use?

White. That was sort of interesting. I thought, okay, colored. No way. It is definitely black. It's very prevalent even to this day.

And then buses.

Yes, They sit in the back. We would be sitting in the back, and they told us to come to the front. It was interesting for me to go through that. That was in the early stages.

Who would tell you to move to the front? Who would say that to you?

All the other ones who were sitting on the bus. But I don't know if they were white or, most of them were white. The blacks wouldn't say, they're not vocal. It's very sad. And they'd keep to themselves and they were more comfortable that way, too, to keep it to themselves. I mean, you go to a public restroom. Definitely we were considered white.

Did you experience any backlash? Even though you were considered white in the segregated South, did you experience any kind of discrimination from either side?

Not at all, not at all. They considered us white.

Even after the war?

Even after the war. They had never seen Japanese. And they thought we were Chinese. But they don't have many chop sueys because it's almost all French cooking down there. So they don't get the restaurants. People go to New Orleans to eat southern food. *[laughs]* It's a beautiful city though. I loved it. And people are so different.

In what way?

They're very kind to us. Really different from Californians. Californians are selfish. They think of themselves, go forth and go ahead, you know. But the South, they're very hospitable, they think of you. They're friendly. I loved it. I could live there all the time. As it was, I lived there fifteen years.

So how did your father get this job right after camp?

He was a journalist like I said, and very good in writing Chinese characters. He was befriended by a Chinese man who was in the shrimp business. And he told him, "Come here to New Orleans." So we went, he really befriended us. I say this really with a sense of — he was so nice to us that even when I left there because my father passed, he found out why I was going back to Los Angeles, he said, 'I have property here. We could bury him here in Louisiana.' He was willing to let me bury him there. That's how nice he was to us. I thought that was sort of a nice gesture. He didn't have to say that.

Do you remember his name?

Setsuko: C.D. Hoy. He's no longer alive, of course. He had two sons and they were very kind to us, too. They must be very old by now.

Sandy: But she went to college in Louisiana. Loyola University.

And what did you study?

Microbiology.

So were you working in New Orleans?

Yes. The state health department.

What did you do?

As a microbiologist. I worked with specimens, identified organisms. And then my father passed. So I came back to L.A. with my mother and I worked in Lynwood, California. And that's why I worked at St. Francis Hospital for 30 years.

Where did you meet your husband?

Church [*laughs*].

What kind of Church?

Methodist.

What was his camp experience?

Well, he was in the service. He was in 442. His family went to Colorado, Amache camp whereas I went to Arkansas.

And he survived the war. Did he see combat?

It was in Italy. He was in combat with Charlie Company. I remember his "C" company.

And what was his first name?

Koichi. They'd call him "Koy" for a nickname.

So he was lucky.

Sandy: He was very lucky. I think he'd always tell us about his friends who got their arm shot off.



Koichi Asano in Europe during his service in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Courtesy of the Masao Sakagami Collection

You know, one of the things I still remember to this day is that the bullet came aiming for him and it hit his heel of his boot. So the heel was shot off, and he thought that was a sign. So he says, "I have to thank God for that." He became a diehard Christian after that. He went to church, I mean, we can't do anything on Sundays. I had to go to church.

Sandy: He taught the youth groups.

He helped the young boys at night because they, didn't have anything, didn't have anywhere to go. He looked after the young

boys. He helped them a lot.

Did you yourself grow up Buddhist?

Originally, I was Buddhist. Nichiren Beikoku in Boyle Heights.

And so then you started going to Methodist churches after you met your husband?

My friends introduced me to the Christian church.

Is your husband still alive?

Setsuko: No.

Sandy: He passed in 1995. He wasn't quite 80 yet.

And your family moved to New Orleans after and you grew up in the south?

That's right. I'm a Southern gal.

I wonder if it would have been interesting, though, how they felt about, you know, Japan and even losing the war, which was their home originally.

Well, my family, my parents became pro-America immediately. Their whole psyche was completely turned around. So I said, well, they are really American.

Did they ever get their citizenship?

Both of them did. 1953. Because I remember I had to go to class with them. They went to class to learn.

So your resettlement experience was different because you were in New Orleans. When did your mother pass?

In her 90s. So her history is interesting. She was only 18 and was in The Manchurian War. Yeah, I think it's that far back. She was an army nurse. She says most of those soldiers when they were in the hospital, they were having things like appendicitis. Not even shot with a bullet. And here I thought, okay. Gunshot wounds. No, they came in the hospital with symptoms of appendicitis. Things like that. And she took care of them. She was only 18. I couldn't get over that, that she was there taking care of the soldiers. You know, the Japanese war, they were short of personnel. They just wanted to put anyone who could tie a bandage in there.

She was really a workaholic. She became a very good midwife. I remember that because she used to drive in her Model-T Ford up the hills in San Diego delivering babies. And the people, you know, were farmers and they couldn't pay. So they would pay with produce. I still remember that. And I would be sitting in the backseat. Taking me [for] a midnight driving in that

car for delivery. Mostly at night they had babies [*laughs*].

Sandy: And nobody to watch you? So she just put you in the back seat?

Setsuko: I was in the back seat all the time, because she could drive. I mean she was a really strong woman.

Every night. Always delivering baby.

Sandy: Every night?

Setsuko: Practically. She had made a lot of house calls. She was strong. And my father, this was a silly story, but he's afraid of the night and dark. And he had to go to the outhouse all the time and she would have to take him.

Sandy: Isn't that funny? Because it's the reverse. That's why she was strong.

Setsuko: He depended on her for everything. He was good with the writing but —

She was the anchor.

I think she was the one to keep the family together. I remember she'd be up all night in those days sewing handkerchiefs. Rolling handkerchiefs, dozens. And I remember 'cause when I got older I had to take it to Pasadena where they collected these hand-rolled handkerchiefs that she'd be making. She'd be up all night sewing by hand. I'd have to count them in dozens and pile them up and take it to Pasadena. I remember that part. They suffered and worked hard.

Was she still alive when the redress happened?

Setsuko: I can't recall. She died when she was ninety something.

Sandy: I think she died before '88.

When you received it, what was your reaction to it? You know, getting the apology and the money.

Well, I was glad that they admitted or took a responsibility to that, although to me it was just a token. But at least they owned up to it. That was their way.

And sometimes there's no other way to show it.

You know, it's impossible. I think I learned a lot in my history. Just experience having lived in the South. You know, I had a lot of experiences. You make the best of what you have.

What are some of those lessons? Are things you want people to remember about the experience of the war and what the Japanese Americans had to go through?

Well, it's all what you look like, appearance. They didn't judge you by education or what, you know, it's how you look. And of course, I was practically embedded in it in the South. That's where they really had discrimination, still to this day all. So I lived it.

I'm curious, if you had not lived in the South and seen that, what do you think would have changed in your ideas about race in America? Why was that so impactful for you?

Well, the difference I found in California, for example. People are very self-centered. They're all for themselves getting ahead, beating the person. Whereas in the South, you still have that same kind of French culture where you help each other. The only thing that disturbs me is there's definitely discrimination there between the blacks and the whites. I just happen to be fortunate to be on the white side. But they're definitely there. I think you have to live in the South to really get it and feel it. I'm glad for that opportunity. You know, it's the way you look. You can't help that. That's the way you're born and you have to learn to live with it.

Or we have to learn to treat each other better.

Exactly.

And just quickly, when you were at Saint Francis, what did you do there?

Setsuko: I was a microbiologist. I worked there for 30 years, I was very comfortable there.

Sandy: She became Director of the Laboratory.

Setsuko: You know, what's the funniest thing? In the South you see a lot of infectious diseases. And I thought, okay, I'm going to California. There's not going to be anything there. And by golly, I was shocked. It was lots. And it's because we're so close to Mexico. I didn't realize it until you get here. I said, 'Why is it that I'm still seeing these organisms?'

And you being in the sciences, it sounds like you were ahead of your time as well. Were a lot of your peers men?

No, not necessarily. Well, there were a few men. You know, there were a lot of women, too.

I thought maybe you would have been the only one.

I'm old but I'm not *that* old! [*laughs*]

And then what about your husband, what did he do for work?

Setsuko: He was in the automotive business. He worked for a parts store, counterman selling parts. We even decided to go into business and it lasted six years. But I thought, no way am I going to lose my job. So I stayed and worked and just went to the store after work, five o'clock; three to five on Saturdays, and he refused to open on Sundays. And I said, Sundays is where you make it. And he refused because he had to go to church.

Sandy: Is that why?

Setsuko: Yes!

Oh, he was dedicated.

Setsuko: He was.